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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to show how its author/researchers were brought to reconsider some of the assumptions behind a small arc project that was being conducted on the professional development of student teachers in Australia. A small group of English Method students were invited to participate in three focus group interviews: before their first teaching round; after their first round; and then after their second (and final) round. Although the composition of the group changed slightly over the year, a smaller number of students, all in the same tutorial group, attended every interview. The intention was to interview some of the supervising teachers with whom the student teachers had worked in the course of the year, but the author/researchers were unable to fully implement this plan. Later in the year, a small focus group discussion on supervision was set up, involving leading members of the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE), to compare their perspective on supervision with that of the student teachers. This small qualitative study is firmly grounded in the author/educators' work as teacher educators. By focusing on the ways in which they have been obliged to reconceptualize their research, they hope to achieve a critical perspective on their professional practice. The original research proposal is appended. (Contains 12 references.) (NKA)

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Forming a Professional Identity:

Conversations between English Method Students

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(Work in Progress)

Presentation DOE02121

Any research worth doing sends you back to the terms in which your originally conceived the inquiry. The purpose of this paper is to show how we were brought to reconsider some of the assumptions behind a small arc project that we have been conducting on the professional development of student teachers.

A copy of the original proposal is included as an appendix to this paper. A small group of English Method students were invited to participate in three focus group interviews: before their first teaching round, after their first round, and then after their second (and final) round. Although the composition of the group changed slightly over the year, a small number of students, all in the same tutorial group, attended every interview. We had intended to interview some of the supervising teachers with whom the student teachers had worked in the course of the year, but (as will be explained below) we were unable to fully implement this plan. Later in the year, we set up a small focus group discussion on supervision, involving leading members of the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE), in order to compare their perspective on supervision with that of the student teachers.

We have been engaged in a small qualitative study that is firmly grounded in our work as teacher educators. By focusing on the ways in which we have been obliged to reconceptualise our research, we hope to achieve a critical perspective on our professional practice.

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1. Teachers' Voices

When we began the research on which this paper is based, our aim was to explore how the professional development of English Method students was shaped by their relationships with supervising teachers. The project was partly devised in reaction to stories which our students were bringing back with them from teaching rounds. Many were finding it difficult to maintain their burgeoning sense of their professional identity while reconciling themselves to their supervising teachers' advice and adjusting to the culture of the school in which they had been placed. We felt that by focusing on the professional dialogue between student teachers and their supervising teachers during teaching rounds, we could affirm the importance of good supervisory practices - something that is very timely, given a certain loss of historical memory about the needs of beginning teachers by the profession. We also wished to develop a more finely tuned sense of the formation of student teachers' professional identities, as they negotiated their way between demands made on them by their supervising teachers and the university in the course of their teaching rounds.

Some aspects of our original research design proved to be unfeasible because of factors that were beyond our control. We proposed to work with supervising teachers who were recognised as accomplished teachers of English, and who were themselves committed to improving their supervision. Yet although we came into contact with such teachers, they had only a limited amount of time to spare. Our focus was therefore largely on the group discussions in which the student teachers engaged at the end of each round rather than on the professional dialogue they experienced with their supervisors. Often these student teachers would reflect on the quality of the supervision they had received, when we were reminded yet again about the crucial role that supervisors play in their professional growth (some students were nursing badly bruised egos at the hands of indifferent supervisors), but their discussions were more wide ranging than that, and as researchers we found ourselves focusing on the ways they were able to give each other professional support by engaging in conversations with each other.

This shift in focus partly explains why we have been prompted to return to the assumptions behind our original proposal and subject them to critical scrutiny. For by attending to the anecdotes and reflections that the student teachers shared with each other, we are ascribing to them an agency that was not a feature of the original research design. The wording of the original proposal includes reference to the way student teachers' professional development is 'shaped significantly by their relationships with their supervising teachers'. We position student teachers as being 'inducted' into English teaching through their professional dialogue with their supervising teachers during teaching rounds. We postulate that the preservice experience can be conceptualised as 'the discursive formation of teachers' professional identities', drawing on Gee's definition of discourse as 'particular ways to act, talk, think, feel, believe and value that are consistent with the norms of the community and enable them to take on a particular role that others would recognise' (Gee, 1991). Yet this is only half the story, as Sean, one of the student teachers who participated in our study reveals in an early interview:

> I mean, I think that the best supervisors... that supervisors should have these particular qualities and that can help us, I think that a lot of the time, sometimes we the students miss the point that any education or learning is up to us. So I kind of struggle with the meaning of how much is required of me and how much is required of my supervisor. I'd like him to do this, but maybe I should be doing something else to encourage him to do this or maybe I should take more responsibility for my, treat it as professional development, so maybe the real questions we should be asking are how do we...um... promote initiative and ...um... kind of actively pursue this in ourselves...

Sean's comments prompt reflection on how student teachers conceptualise their experiences during teaching rounds. In addition to ensuring that the requisite conditions for professional development exist, we should focus on how student teachers themselves actually learn to become teachers, helping them to become conscious of the frames of reference they are using to judge professional practice.

We now find it ironic that our original proposal positioned the students as passive recipients of induction, with change enacted upon them, the subjects of a set of discourses over which they have no control. This is not to suggest that we should indulge in some kind of romantic valorisation of the 'voice' of student teachers, for all the critical insight and irreverent humour they display when evaluating their professional development during rounds. Here is how Angie weighs up the merits of her supervisors during her first teaching round:

> And I got in there and I had this idiot woman for History who didn't know she was having me until the day I arrived and she was a second year teacher, so she probably didn't have a lot of experience herself, and then I had this fantastic mature absolutely gifted English teacher and I did so much with her and she's, 'What do you think we should do tomorrow. I want to get them sort of heading down this track, how would you get them there?' I'd suggest something and she'd say 'That sounds fantastic. Let's, you know, go do that, bring it back, show me and we'll revise'. Like she was really supportive. And then I had the History teacher saying 'you can't do this with them' and 'you can't do that with them' and 'I've booked into the library for the next week'. Like just completely undermining any sense of what I thought I would be doing. And by about halfway through the second week I was thinking I don't think I even really want to teach History because I wasn't getting any experience in it. I was really down on it, like I felt terrible about History and teaching it. And then Rosemary was coming to visit so I put my foot down and told this lady basically screw your pre-planned stuff I'm doing something to impress my supervisor. And I'd rung Rosemary and Rosemary said 'yeah use me coming to get you out of the rut you're in'. So I did that and I did the most fantastic stuff and I really, really impressed myself, impressed the kids and we all had the best lesson ever. And then the lady was really scared of me after that. She said 'you do what ever you want I don't care', and she backed right off. It was really weird her total attitude changed and I'm like I want to be a History teacher again.

Angie is licensed to tell this story by other members of the group. Her story is a product of the situation in which she is telling it, reflecting the values and knowledge she shares with her audience. As such, her story silences other voices, most notably that of 'this idiot woman for History'. Hargreaves reminds us of the importance of being equally attentive to the views of teachers with whom we disagree (Hargreaves, 1996; cf. Doecke, 2000). Not to acknowledge the existence of radically discrepant viewpoints is to slip into an uncritical celebration of a professional community of likeminded souls and to sidestep major challenges in bringing about meaningful educational reform.

Yet the most valuable outcome of our project remains the quality of the 'teacher talk' in which these beginning teachers have engaged. The project gave these student teachers an opportunity to jointly construct professional knowledge through talk. This contrasted with the way they were often silenced in schools, when they were typically seated at the end of long tables in staff rooms, and forced to practise the self effacement that behoves a student teacher. Not that they always accepted the position assigned to them. Angie's feisty defiance of her supervising teacher was not unique to her. Others also colluded with their university supervisors to establish better working relationships with indifferent supervising teachers. Butwhether Angie is actually giving an accurate account of what happened is less significant than the fact that she constructs this heroic tale of her adventures within the context of the professional conversations in which she is participating (cf. Swidler, 2001). The conversations themselves became a vehicle for testing knowledge and values, and for refining their judgements with respect to the complexities of their professional practice.

A further set of reflections by Sean opens up another dimension of their conversations. These reflections emerged out of an exchange between Sean and Lucinda in the course of the final group discussion:

> My supervisor was, it was her second year teaching, she was twenty-three. And I got the feeling over and over again that she seemed to me like a primary school teacher. She had an interesting way with the year 7 class. I guess at first I thought ... mmm, how's this going to go. But she had some really interesting things with genre and had brought some really good points out from her classes that I didn't expect, I didn't think that would happen but I guess I underestimated her.
>
> Lucinda: Can I just ask? When you say like a primary school teacher, how are you kind of envisaging a primary school teacher?
>
> Sean: Well she was really concerned with transition issues. And I think most of her classes were around the lower middle years like 7 and 8's and stuff and I think they'd ... You know that's an interesting question what made me think that? Just her manner I guess in the way that she directed the students seemed to me more like a mother than I'd expect a teacher. And I guess those lines it was crossed and they can blur and ...
>
> Lucinda: What about her subject knowledge of English pedagogy, theory, approaches, texts?

> Sean: I think she took ... from my point of view it seemed like she took quite a long time to ... she spent a lot of time explaining the task in helping the students to understand what was going to happen in the task and way they need to do it. For example, we did ... she did a unit on fairytales and spent quite a long time reading to them, pointing out things they'd be able to access like some Roald Dahl *Revolting Rhymes* and these kind of things. And she seemed to be pretty keyed into getting the, I think, to targeting her teaching to their understanding and to bring them along slightly to spend that time. It seemed to me rightly or wrongly like primary school teaching teachers might do, you know, have the time to spend to develop those things kind of.

Sean is looking for a frame of reference that will help him make sense of his impressions of his supervising teacher's practice. In an effort to capture her distinctive style, he draws on a common distinction between the supposedly child-centred focus of primary school teachers as opposed to the subject orientation of secondary school teachers. All the student teachers who participated in the group discussions showed themselves to be attentive teacher watchers. Sometimes this meant defining themselves as a different kind of teacher, invariably one who is attentive and caring and flexible, rather than being 'pre-planned' and in a ' rut'. Such efforts to affirm their difference from teachers who had resorted to routised school practices were always strongly supported by their interlocutors. At other moments their teacher-watching meant engaging in discriminations that were more akin to systematic inquiry. Sean is bringing everything he knows to this activity of identifying his supervising teacher's pedagogy, making a provisional judgement that acknowledges how his own preconceptions are shaping his understanding of her approach. He recognises the rich complexities of classrooms, and the difficulty of judging the actions of individual teachers. Within our preservice programs we might usefully explore the nature of both kinds of judgement, enabling our students to cultivate a metacritical awareness of the discriminations they are making.

This is not to privilege the way these student teachers 'talked shop' as though this is the only way they can construct professional knowledge: there were many aspects of their situation as beginning teachers that they could not name, many dimensions of their professional practice that eluded their understanding. Their conversations took place within broader contexts that shaped the exchanges between these beginning teachers, whether they were aware of them or not. Those contexts included the ongoing need to review the planning and delivery of the English Method program, the establishment of the Victorian Institute of Teaching and the standards that it is likely to mandate for beginning teachers, as well as the publication of professional standards for English teachers (the STELLA project). In addition, there have been ongoing debates amongst English teachers and Department bureaucrats in Victoria about whether subject English might be subsumed by something called 'literacy', and whether English could maintain its integrity within an interdisciplinary environment (prefigured by fatuous initiatives like the 'Thinking Curriculum'). Teachers are aging, technology is getting younger, a teacher shortage looms, Department bureaucrats prattle on about multiple intelligences, a funding crisis at tertiary level is biting deeper.

We said earlier that Sean's insights showed that the way we originally conceived our research design told only half the story. But it is not as though we can simply complete the story by adding dimensions that we overlooked. By saying that our original design failed to acknowledge the way that student teachers actively engage in their professional

development we are not suggesting that the larger contexts we have invoked can simply be discounted. It is not a matter of deciding whether their professional knowledge and values can be explained as resulting from their agency or as a function of the discourse community into which they are being inducted. We can affirm their agency and their capacity to formulate a critical perspective on school practices while simultaneously recognising the way they are being produced by those practices.

2. Becoming an 'English' Teacher

The exchange between Sean and Lucinda is also significant because it was one of the few occasions when the issue of the subject-specific nature of their professional development was broached. By invoking the popular notion that 'primary school teachers teach children, whereas secondary teachers teach subjects', Sean is making a distinction between primary school literacy and secondary English. Our original research proposal conceptualised their induction into English teaching as somehow crucially bound up with the extent to which they identified as English teachers. This focus was developed partly in response to the fact that several professional associations in Australia have now formulated standards, all of which claim that at some deep level the professional knowledge and practice of accomplished teachers is subject specific and not simply generic. The Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) has recently published a set of Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia (STELLA) that purport to be a framework for professional development for teachers of English in both primary and secondary schools. We were therefore poised to note the ways in which the professional conversations in which these student teachers engaged might reflect their burgeoning identities as English teachers. We imagined that they would spend at least some of their time reflecting on the way they had devised teaching strategies that mediated between their knowledge of English and the needs of students in their classrooms, transforming their disciplinary knowledge into 'pedagogical content knowledge' (Shulman, 1986).

What have we found? The personal relationships that were enacted through these conversations inevitably shape our sense of their professional development as beginning teachers. For they essentially described their teaching rounds experiences as a matter of entering into a set of relationships: with their supervising teachers, with other staff, with students in their classes. They then used their conversations with one another to unknot the complexities of the relationships into which they had stepped during their teaching rounds

This is not to say that their preoccupation with personal relationships undermined their burgeoning sense of themselves as English teachers. Schooling cannot be satisfactorily explained as a set of direct personal relationships between people, and yet personal relationships still form the immediate context for professional growth. Their sense of the importance of personal relationships is also congruent with a tradition of English teaching as pastoral care, as involving the creation of certain types of human subjects (Hunter, 1988). Angie, referring to an English Method lecture in which the presenter had explored the difficulties of dealing with gendered and racist readings of text, explains the difference between English teachers and teachers in other subject areas in the following way:

> To me they seemed to be more concerned with the emotional welfare of the students. I found they're very concerned about pastoral issues in the classroom when they're studying text. A lot of what she was talking about just in that lecture with interpretation of how the students will take racial or whatever and the whole identity of the students and how they're going to sort of react to everything varies, you just don't get that in History or Maths.

So rather than thinking that their sense of issues relating to English curriculum and pedagogy was completely displaced by their concerns about handling the relationships they encountered in schools, we could argue that they are actually enacting a form of English pedagogy through those relationships.

It is interesting to note that Angie's view about the way pastoral issues are raised in English classrooms was echoed by the experienced teachers from VATE whom we interviewed. This is how Grant described his pedagogy:

> I think I could probably try to stress the idea, it probably sounds so corny, but I would try to stress the idea, just embracing kids. Because I think there is an awful, we all know in our schools that there is an awful lot of non-embracing of kids and their values and their world they inhabit.

Pam then responded by saying this:

> My student teachers learn very quickly that I've got two key things that drive me. And one is about democratic participation. You know talking about sort of imagination that allows us to think of ourselves as creating our future and not just receiving it. And the other one is a feminist perspective.

Even classroom management was seen by these teachers as inextricably bound up with facilitating quality conversations in their classrooms, not simply a condition for effective classroom dialogue but an enactment of it.

> Grant: I want to bring culture and enlightenment to these children vs. how can I get 10B to pay attention.
>
> Pam: But how I can get 10B to pay attention is such a real issue, for a student teacher. And it is a real issue for me when I'm working with the student teacher and often it is an issue for me when I'm not.
>
> Grant: Well it's never not an issue!

We are struck by the way both the student teachers and these experienced teachers conceive of English as involving the enactment of a set of practices and relationships rather than a content area.

The question remains as to the adequacy of concepts like 'pedagogical content knowledge' as a way of explaining the professional development of English teachers. The fact that as a disciplinary area English has always been marked by a high degree of epistemological uncertainty makes it difficult to posit a 'content' that might be

transformed into 'pedagogical content knowledge' (it is noteworthy that whenever Shulman tries to use the work of English teachers to demonstrate the validity of his understanding of professional knowledge, they always appear to be operating within a very traditional paradigm, as though there is indeed a content that might constitute a literary canon or core knowledge - see Shulman, 1987). However, it is not simply the 'contentless' nature of English that is at issue here, but the way in which the student teachers who participated in these conversations were driven by a commitment to the welfare of the students in their care. To understand their professional development it may be more generative to focus on their commitment to social change and human betterment than to imagine that it is essentially a matter of translating their content knowledge into pedagogical content knowledge. We felt that we were indeed tracing their burgeoning sense of themselves as English teachers, but that this had very little to do with their commitment to English as an academic field or body of knowledge, as Shulman's model of professional knowledge seems to imply (cf. Banks, et al., 1999).

3. Conclusion

The value of teachers 'talking shop' is hardly a discovery. There is a growing literature on the ways in which teachers are able to construct professional knowledge through their conversations with one another (cf. Clark, 2001; Doecke, Brown and Loughran, 2000). Yet there are paradoxes here that need to be confronted, most notably the deteriorating conditions in universities. The students sit through large lectures; they then attend tutorials involving up to twenty five people, often led by walk on/walk off sessional staff who are only available and paid for the hours they actually stand in front of a class. They are given limited opportunity to observe other teachers teaching in schools and suddenly they are plonked in front of a class themselves, with the lottery-like allocation of a busy supervisor who is expected to give them support. Research may show that conversation is an indispensable medium for professional growth, and yet both schools and universities are finding it increasingly difficult to sponsor such conversations. The main opportunity students have for dialogue with each other is in informal settings (now reduced also by the phenomenon of increased part time and full time work by students), or when they snatch conversations with sympathetic teachers in staff rounds during teaching rounds. Occasionally they are also able to participate in research projects of the kind we have been describing in this paper.

Although at one level the fact that these student teachers engaged in 'talking shop' may appear unremarkable, at another level their conversations pose a significant challenge to the policy and curriculum environment that has formed around us in recent years. By participating in such conversations the student teachers are affirming their capacity to play an active role in shaping the curriculum and policy environment in which they operate, and to resist being positioned as merely creatures of that environment. Our original research design now strikes us as deeply flawed because it unwittingly mirrors the very structures and controls that it pretends to challenge. We now aim to reconceptualise our practice as teacher educators in a way that acknowledges our students' agency, and to develop another language for describing their professional development.

Appendix

Aims of Project

1. To monitor the professional development of English Method students as they shift from the discursive community of the university to that of the school
2. To explore the professional dialogue between supervising teachers and student teachers in planning and implementing lessons
3. To explore differences between attitudes and values of student teachers and those of supervising teachers
4. To explore the changing relationship between content knowledge and pedagogy in the case of student teachers and supervising teachers (i.e. the contrasting relationship between academic knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge in the case of student teachers and experienced teachers)

Research Plan

The project draws on discourse theory (Foucault, 1981; Gee, 1991) to theorise ways in which the professional identities of student English teachers are shaped by various discourse communities in which they operate. We borrow Gee's definition of discourse as 'an "identity kit" which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act and talk so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize' (Gee, 1991) to conceptualise the professional development of preservice English Method students as an identity transformation.

We posit at least three discourse communities that are relevant to understanding the formation of student English teachers' professional identities: (1) the discourse community of the university, including preferred ways of reflecting on practice in English Method classes (2) the discourse community of the school, including the experience and values of supervising teachers, and (3) the support networks initiated by student teachers while they are on the practicum. These discourse communities are not necessarily in conflict - they can exist in a productive tension with each other. It is probably best to think of them as overlapping, intersecting and dynamic.

Our project will enact the idea of a discourse community, even as we explore the roles of these discourse communities in shaping the professional growth of English student teachers. We propose (1) to set up a small group of English Method students who can engage in discussion with each other during the course of their rounds, i.e. a small inquiry group that will provide a context for student teachers to reflect on their professional practice and the challenges they encounter when implementing their ideas and (2) to bring supervising teachers together to discuss the challenges they face in supervising their student teachers and to reflect on their supervisory practices. For the purposes of this study, we propose to work with supervising teachers who are recognised as accomplished teachers of English, and who are committed to improving the quality of their supervision.

With respect to both inquiry groups, our aim is to facilitate a rich professional dialogue amongst the participants, a joint construction of knowledge of the complexities of student teaching (Mishler, 1986).

In addition, student teachers will be observed in classes, as they implement their lesson plans, and recordings made of supervising teachers' commentary, in order to capture the professional dialogue between individual student teachers and their supervising teachers.

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